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Collaborative Teaching and Self-study: Engaging Student Teachers in Sociological Theory in Teacher Education.

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Abstract: This article presents some of the findings of a three-year project researching the impact of changes made to teaching and learning in a first-year sociology paper for primary and early childhood education (ece) student teachers. The context of the research is an undergraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme situated in the School of Education in a New Zealand University. Through self-study, teacher educators sought to gain a deeper understanding of how changes made to the paper influenced their teaching and student learning. A collaborative teaching relationship was particularly important for the teacher educators to share concerns and present ideas for innovative practice in a safe space. The relationship, built over a period of three years, encouraged a mutual desire to create a teaching and learning environment that valued the student voice and was engaging for teacher educators and student teachers.

Introduction

The research project carried out over a period of three years (2010-2012) involved two teacher educators and first-year primary and early childhood education student teachers. The students were enrolled in the paper entitled Whānau¹, Family and Society, one of four core papers (for primary and early childhood students) taught as part of the three-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. The paper is an introduction to sociological theory with a focus on New Zealand society.

The research project was initially developed in response to persistently mixed (mainly critical) student evaluations of the paper. Structural changes to the paper in 2010 resulted in a significant increase in student numbers and a move to large lecture teaching. Both teacher educators saw these changes as an opportunity to implement and evaluate a different approach to teaching and learning. In previous published papers Hogan and Daniell (2011; 2012) have written about the particular challenges of teaching in a large class and some of the new approaches that were implemented as a result of student feedback gathered through critical incident questionnaires.

In this article we draw on the journals kept by the teacher educators to explore the strengths and challenges of collaborative teaching to enhance teaching and learning. The discussion is informed by the wider literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning and self-study, particularly as it relates to the ITE context.

1. Whānau (noun): extended family, family group. The primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members. (Source: www.maoridictionary.co.nz)

Context

In Whānau, Family and Society first-year student teachers are introduced to sociology as a foundational discipline over one semester. The paper is informed by a New Zealand sociology text (McLennan, McManus & Spoonley, 2010), which specifically includes opportunities for relating sociological theory to the New Zealand context. The aim is for learners to study whānau, family and society from a sociological perspective in order to better understand their role as early and primary school teachers. Topics of gender, class, ethnicity, economics and power are studied to understand their impact on families and children. The Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the founding document of NZ signed in 1840 between Māori and the British Crown) and the three principles of partnership, participation and protection are explored to promote greater understanding of the diversity of whānau/family in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

As mentioned above the student evaluations of the paper were generally critical and reflected a high rate of dissatisfaction particularly in relation to the teaching of sociological theory. Students commented on the ‘unnecessary complexity’ of the theory and many expressed frustration with what they saw as irrelevant content. In response to the evaluations both teacher educators were highly motivated to research the literature on different approaches to teaching and learning of sociological theory in an attempt to enhance student interest and engagement and at the same time examine their own experience of collaborative teaching.

Teaching from our strengths and interests

Linda’s experience in tertiary teaching was particularly important in developing clear learning outcomes, aligned assessments and the discipline of lesson plans to guide the teaching and learning. She encouraged critical thinking and an opportunity for ‘in-class’ activities that supported the students to work together. The assessments included peer feedback and group work. The programme of learning was created to incorporate a blend of face-to-face lectures and online activities. Due to the semester timetable (including practicum) most of the theory lectures took place in the first six weeks of the semester.

Vivienne has a background in early childhood education with a particular interest in social justice and critical pedagogy. Her teaching is informed by feminist practice and she has a strong commitment to challenging power relationships inherent in the teacher/student relationship. In order to evaluate the changes to the paper Vivienne and Linda kept a journal over the semester and built in regular opportunities for students to give feedback using a critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) developed by Stephen Brookfield (1995).

Both Vivienne and Linda shared the teaching with each taking a topic of their own interest to develop the lectures. For example, Vivienne focused on gender and sociological theory while Linda focused on class and theory of family. Over the three years of teaching the paper a large bank of resources was accumulated both online and in class materials. Each lecture included a range of audio-visual resources with a focus on contemporary materials to stimulate discussion based on topics that we anticipated would be familiar to many of the students. The text book was used in each lecture as a reference point to maintain a New Zealand focus (McLennan, McManus & Spoonley, 2010).

As we developed the paper over the three years we deliberately sought out materials that would challenge students to think critically about the topics rather than provide them with ‘information’ to be consumed passively in class. This decision was in part based on our strong commitment to teaching and learning as a shared activity but also reflected our different teaching styles and backgrounds. For example, when teaching the gender lecture,

Vivienne became very aware of how her teaching was informed by her feminist beliefs and strong commitment to social justice issues. This awareness was overtly present in the resources selected and in her style of teaching.

Linda was always aware and mindful of the learning environment and ways in which student engagement was gained, maintained or lost. On reflection upon these observations, lessons were reviewed accordingly with new ways being tried in order to fulfil the needs of different learning styles.

In the process of writing and sharing journals we found a shared common vision for the paper. The joint expectation for sharing ideas and thrashing out problems was particularly valuable when journal entries exposed some difficult emotional responses. A strong sense of trust between us was established and it was important that vulnerabilities could be discussed without fear of 'exposure' in the wider context of the department. The shared vision for the paper created a space for both of us to challenge preconceived and taken-for-granted teaching strategies. We both felt safe to experiment in the knowledge that the experience was validated through a joint commitment to enhancing the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Other unintended outcomes of collaboration were the opportunities for us to model aspects of effective teaching practice by providing students with diverse perspectives on a topic and seeing that different perspectives can be illuminating rather than necessarily 'critical' or 'argumentative'.

Literature

Much of the literature on teaching sociology in teacher education is seeking to find innovative and practical ways to introduce theory to students studying sociology as a minor subject rather than their main discipline. There is general acknowledgement that teaching sociological theory to education students is problematic and requires innovative teaching and learning practices, for example; student journals, online quizzes/blogs and role play (Pederson, 2010). One of the problems identified in the research is that students are often challenged in their thinking by some of the theory that seeks to unsettle taken-for-granted values and beliefs, for example, relating to poverty and class. Often this requires teacher educators to "help people learn new ways of seeing a familiar world" which is "no easy task" (Diem & Helfenbein, 2008, p. xii).

Albers (2008) clearly articulates the emotional impact of trialling teaching and learning strategies with students studying sociology. She describes the 'unintended' consequences of pedagogic innovations (p. 269) and how these can result in student resistance to what are perceived as challenges to the traditional student/teacher relationship. In fact the resistance can be so great that it is counterproductive to learning per se. Furthermore Pederson (2010) points out, theory can represent a significant stumbling block for many students, which can pose particular challenges for the teacher. This was evident in our experience when introducing aspects of theory that were particularly challenging to the students' taken-for-granted assumptions.

A decision was made to take a collaborative approach to the changes to the teaching and learning which specifically enabled both of us, as teacher educators, to draw on our different strengths i.e. tertiary teaching and feminist pedagogy. Research on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has promoted collaborative teaching, including reflection and pedagogic inquiry, for improving teaching and learning (Gosling, 2006; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013; Loughran, 2010). The focus of SoTL has traditionally been to enhance the student learning experience (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). We also found that our own teaching was significantly enhanced. Our shared vision was to create a

classroom where students would have opportunities to discuss sociological ideas and problems and learn through the “reciprocal exchange of teacher-student discourses” (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p.27). For us the challenge was how to create a teaching and learning environment which would promote such an exchange in the context of teaching sociology in a large class situation.

Gosling (2006) cautions there are many possible outcomes from research that seeks to investigate simplistic relationships between teaching interventions and student learning, and it is important that as researchers we have a clear methodology, motivation and framework for undertaking such research. Loughran (2005) in his discussion on self-study in teacher education explains the difference between “teaching per se and teaching about teaching” (p.9) and the importance of moving beyond a ‘tips and tricks’ approach to teaching in teacher education. He reiterates that developing one’s teaching about teaching can demonstrate to student teachers the problematic nature of teaching and learning practice.

Methodology

The guiding methodology for the three-year research project was action research which was considered to be appropriate because we, as lecturers, and the students were active participants in the process of learning. The catalyst for the initial purpose of the project was to implement and evaluate different approaches to learning and teaching in large classes. As the research project unfolded our own stories began to emerge and the methodology evolved to become self-study. This shift in focus highlighted the non-linear process of learning and teaching exposing that it as ‘messy, complicated and contextualised’ (Pithouse, Mitchell & Weber, 2009, p.46). Self-study “provided evidence and context” to understanding our practice (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 240).

As self-study researchers we examined our personal values and professional practice making the reflective journals a valuable resource as we worked to improve our teaching and student learning (McNiff, 2007). The journals also enabled us to take account of our “processes, emotions, complexities, nuances, values ...” (Pithouse et al, 2009, p. 44) during the project. In other words the examination of our practice was a deep and challenging experience that involved “risk, courage and support” (Pithouse et al, 2009, p.47). Working together in an environment of trust and safety enabled us to gain insight into ourselves as individuals and colleagues; to make mistakes, change planned approaches and share feelings of joy, disappointment, satisfaction and sheer frustration without censure, to create opportunities for creative solutions (Pithouse et al, 2009, p.47). Feelings and ideas were discussed immediately after each lecture enriching our teaching practice making it a more meaningful, collegial experience. Journaling enabled us to stand back and review our immediate responses to what were often difficult engagements with student learning.

According to Samaras (2011) self-study has five characteristics and the way in which they have been demonstrated in this paper are shown in italics:

1. A personal situation inquiry (*inquiring into own teaching in the context of teaching and learning sociological theory in teacher education*)
2. Critical collaborative inquiry (*collaborative teaching*)
3. Improved learning (*to improve our professional practice*)
4. A transparent and systematic research process (*journaling and collegial discussion*)
5. Knowledge generation and presentation (*extending and sharing the learning experience through practice and journal articles*).

Self-study is a vital component of professional development as it highlights the non-linear process of learning and teaching. As with action research, self-study demonstrates both the fruitless pursuit of anticipating a neat outcome to a research question (McNiff, 2007) and the continuing process of teaching and learning.

Reflections

In the following section we highlight some extracts from our journals to demonstrate how the process of writing helped to create opportunities for questioning some of the taken for granted aspects of our practice. In our reflections we were guided by the work of Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) who have written extensively on the strengths and challenges of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (S-STTEP). When thinking about our journal writing we found their ‘wonderings and questions’ (p.37) very helpful in guiding our reflections:

Our Journals

In her research, Berry (2007) identified six areas of tension that many teacher educators may experience in teaching and learning with student teachers. One tension discussed in detail is the tension of valuing and reconstructing experience that, according to Berry, “lies in working with prospective teachers in ways that move them beyond simply (re) confirming their existing beliefs about teaching and learning” (p.121). We found that this tension was particularly significant in our experience of working on the Whānau Family and Society paper, which for many students created a sense of dissonance between their own beliefs and some of the ideas presented, for example the idea of New Zealand being a classless society.

The practice of writing in our journals gave us an opportunity to expose some of these tensions and to attempt to find ways to explore these, sometimes vulnerable, experiences in our teaching in a collaborative and supportive endeavour. The following journal excerpts show how both of us, as teacher educators, focused on different aspects of our practice.

The researchers’ journals were used as an important resource to reflect on their individual and collaborative experiences. As a result of this we spent a lot of time discussing how we could make the theory less intimidating and more ‘real’ for the students. One strategy that Linda implemented was to talk about her own experience of class using examples from her family and home life to demonstrate Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Bourdieu, 1994). In doing this she presented herself as an ‘actor’ experiencing class as lived experience. This was well received by the students because they could make tangible links between a lived experience and the text. On another occasion she created a story about the 1950’s to incorporate Talcott Parson’s theory of structural functionalism.

Linda and storytelling

The whole organisational network went down today and the silence was eerie. During the next class I am to talk about Talcott Parsons and his theory of structural functionalism. What if the system is still down and we can’t use power point to guide the class? In the silence I considered alternatives; re-read my notes and allowed my imagination to wander. Not many of the students would be able to relate to life in the 1950’s, but I could.

I used to listen to my Mother, Grandmother and Aunts talking about Mr & Mrs So-and-so down the street, who was working where, who was moving to one of those 'new estates' that were being built on the edge of town. It also helped that my parents owned a shop when I was small and I loved eaves dropping on the grown-up conversations.

I thought about how Parson's theory came to life through the experiences of people of the time, and so I began to write. I wove a story that included real life happenings to tacitly demonstrate the theoretical concepts. It was living theory. I wore a 1950's 'Babycham' pinafore, sat on a chair and read the story. Interlopers would have been able to hear a pin drop!

I wonder if the system will be out of action next week

Vivienne on the Gender Lecture

The lecture on gender had evolved over the three years of the project and became a significant focus of understanding my pedagogy. Historically (prior to 2010) the lecture had been presented to demonstrate the inequality of gender and how this resulted in persistent patterns of male dominance in family life and wider society. The lecture was overtly feminist in its content and theoretical framing.

Excerpt from Vivienne's Journal 2010

Before the lecture I revised the power point (dated 2008) which reflected my own perspective on what I identified as important issues in relation to gender. I wanted to present the lecture in such a way that problematised the concept of gender as 'binary' and get the students to move away from simplistic and stereotypic notions of gender equity and feminism.

When I reflect on why I have changed the focus I can see that this lecture has been stubbornly stuck in the 'feminist' perspective and that in the past this has resulted in a 'shut down' of discussion where many students felt excluded. The stubbornness was in part my own inclination towards the feminist perspective but it was also partly due to 'being stuck' myself. As I have read more around the subject of gender I can see that feminists too have moved on and are also challenging the perpetuation of the gender binary.

The response from the students to the lecture, video and reading reaffirmed for me the importance of opening up the discussion and to avoid becoming too narrow. The combination of the lecture, video and reading (re)presented gender in a new and relevant way which I believe created a more open and receptive classroom ethos.

In particular it gave the opportunity for discussion on topics that would not normally have surfaced in the lecture theatre. For example one male student offered his own very personal account of domestic violence which challenged many preconceived ideas.

One of the surprises for me was the response to the same sex family video clip. The family portrayed in the video was complex and very unconventional. Despite this there was a general feeling that this family had a place in society and many of the students expressed indignation at the Catholic Bishop's suggestion that the family was not 'natural' and that the children would be harmed in the long term.

These responses could of course have been given in a climate of political correctness where students do not want to be seen as being sexist or homophobic given the expectations of the New Zealand Graduating Teacher Standards for acknowledging and valuing difference and diversity.

The excerpt from the journal demonstrates a turning point in Vivienne's teaching and highlighted some of the difficulties she had experienced in the past when teaching the lecture on gender. Through discussion with Linda and the students it became evident that the strident feminist approach to the topic of gender was 'turning students off' rather than opening up spaces for discussion and challenging beliefs founded on stereotypes. As a result of this reflection Vivienne identified herself as someone who has a commitment to feminist teaching and discovered a whole new literature on feminist teaching and pedagogy.

Literature on feminist pedagogy suggests that many teachers are searching for alternative models of teaching and learning which are more aligned to values of social justice which challenge the power relationships traditionally found in the context of a university classroom. According to Ropers-Huilman (1997), when feminist teachers participate in higher education classrooms, their identities are layered and integrated in a complex series of negotiations and struggles. These multiple identities are not left at the door when teachers define and take on professional roles in their teaching. Rather, they inform teaching discourse and practice in multitudinous and intricate ways (p. 327).

The challenge of resistance to teachers' political agendas became particularly relevant for Vivienne when teaching the topic of gender. The focus of the lecture was to introduce the students to different feminist theory and its application to the topic of family. As the lecture progressed there was a sense of growing agitation that manifested itself in direct questioning of the theory and attempts to undermine the lecturer by disrupting other students as they attempted to speak on the topic. The students questioned what they perceived as an overtly feminist stance and a number of students dismissed feminism as being 'out of date'. They drew on some of the traditional stereotypes of feminists as 'dungaree wearing' and 'bra burning' hippies to challenge the relevance of feminist theory. This experience prompted her to reflect on how her teaching was strongly influenced by her own feminist agenda and how this was impacting on the students, at times resulting in open resistance and hostility.

Although acknowledging the contested nature of feminist pedagogy Vivienne has found the ideas of other feminists researchers and writers in education to be of immense value (for example, Ellsworth, 1992; Lenz Taguchi, 2005; Ropers-Huilman, 1997). In particular, the writing of Lenz Taguchi (2005) gave Vivienne a sense that her experience of feeling frustrated and disappointed with the student's responses to the lecture was shared by others. In her writing Lenz Taguchi articulates her frustration with the students and their inability to 'understand' everything the way she understands it (2005, p.248). This reading was valuable in helping Vivienne understand the complexity of the teacher - student relationship and recognising the powerful emotional response that teaching can illicit.

Linda on Student Engagement

I scanned the class for signs that students were engaged in the learning. Some clearly were and their faces were open and questioning. Others were obviously bored and distracted. Lap tops were open and as I wandered around the lecture theatre could see that some were playing games, others on social media and a few working on other papers.

I felt an overwhelming sensation of irritation and disappointment that we did not have their full attention; after all we had worked hard to put together 'interesting' classes that offered a range of activities to suit different learning styles, contexts and interests.

I expressed my frustration to Viv after the class and then took a day or so to reflect on my feelings. Why was I disappointed? I was disappointed because I want the students to be the best early childhood and primary teachers they can be. They will play a vital role in society and be responsible for the development of the next generation. I stopped again and thought of my father who said 'you can't put an old head on young shoulders'. I have to put myself in their shoes and respect their individual ways of being.

As the days passed I reflected on the 'big picture' which was to introduce these first year students to sociology, moderate my expectations accordingly and trust in the process. Maybe I should see myself as a gardener planting seeds rather than a 'teacher'. As a 'teacher' I have one semester to 'see results'. As a 'gardener' I am planting seeds that will blossom in the fullness of time. The students have their lifetime and my contribution is just a small seed of learning.

The opportunity for Linda to reflect on and share her feelings of irritation and disappointment acted as a valuable sounding board to seek resolution from within herself, offering ways in which Linda could change her own perceptions that would lead to positive experiences for the students and herself. Since this time, and whenever a class has appeared to be less successful than planned, her mantra has been 'self-reflection'; look at ourselves first; be pro-active and positive. What can we change and what is non-negotiable? It was a sound and profound lesson.

Discussion

Our initial research focus and motivation had been on improving our teaching and the student's learning experience in response to poor student evaluations and increase in class size. However, as the research developed we became increasingly interested and motivated to understand the teaching and learning nexus from our own 'teacher' perspectives through a process of self-reflection that Dyson (2007) refers to as "the landscape of transformation" (p.36). For Vivienne this meant understanding herself as a teacher who identifies with feminist pedagogy while Linda's concerns were more about the process of enriching and deepening adult learning and teaching to set the students on the path to becoming "effective and responsible learners" (Boud, 2004, p.13).

Through engaging with the literature on self-study we became aware of the wider discussion taking place in research on teacher education. The literature enabled us to find a context for articulating our ideas about practice and sharing these with the staff in the school of education. Researching our teaching created a transparent process for self-review and,

despite concerns about exposing ourselves to student feedback, we were encouraged to embark on the research by reading about the experiences of others.

The decision to have two lecturers on the paper was primarily determined by economic and managerial factors rather than individual lecturer choice. The decision to teach collaboratively, however, was our personal choice. We both recognised the challenges of role modelling effective teaching and learning practices with a large class of student teachers. We were committed to the concept of pedagogical inquiry and reflection as a valid and authentic method of research in education. Despite the pressure to achieve more successful student evaluations, also viewed as an act of increased managerialism in teacher education (Mansfield, 2006), we saw the research as a constructive opportunity to contribute to existing research on pedagogic inquiry within and beyond the immediate teaching and learning context. Increasing managerialism has been critiqued for creating a reductionist discourse within teacher education with Murray and McGuire (2007) arguing that teacher education has become an ‘impossible’ job due to the difficulties of balancing “the academic imperatives of research productivity with the high quality, intensive teaching ideally required for teacher education programmes” (p.288). While acknowledging the risks of self-study we also recognised the enormous potential for benefits to our teaching and learning.

According to Gosling (2006) “when faculty are encouraged to engage in pedagogic inquiry, it is normally because it is assumed that both teaching and student learning will be improved as a consequence” (p. 99). Certainly in our research we were motivated by the prospect of improving both teaching and learning although always aware that this was not a predetermined outcome. The process of investigating and researching our own teaching to enhance student learning is complex and rarely follows a linear trajectory. Claims that relate to causal links between changes in teaching and student outcomes need to be treated with care as Gosling (2006) rightly cautions: “ultimately, we have to make professional judgments, within parameters of uncertainty that are typical of complex social situations, about the relationship between a change in teaching and the changes in students that we think are improvements” (p.101).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted how the process of self-study in teacher education research can be of benefit to both students and teacher educators. Through a combination of shared reflective practice and a commitment to taking risks, we believe that our teaching has opened up possibilities for renegotiating the teaching and learning space between student and teachers, particularly as it relates to teaching sociology theory. As discussions about the role of teacher education in the twenty first century become more prominent we believe that teacher educators have a significant responsibility in modelling new and innovative spaces for sharing and creating new knowledge about teaching and learning. It is our hope that others find our research “meaningful, useful and trustworthy” (Loughran, 2005, p.6) and that it in some way contributes towards a further understanding of the complex dynamics of teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to teacher education.

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